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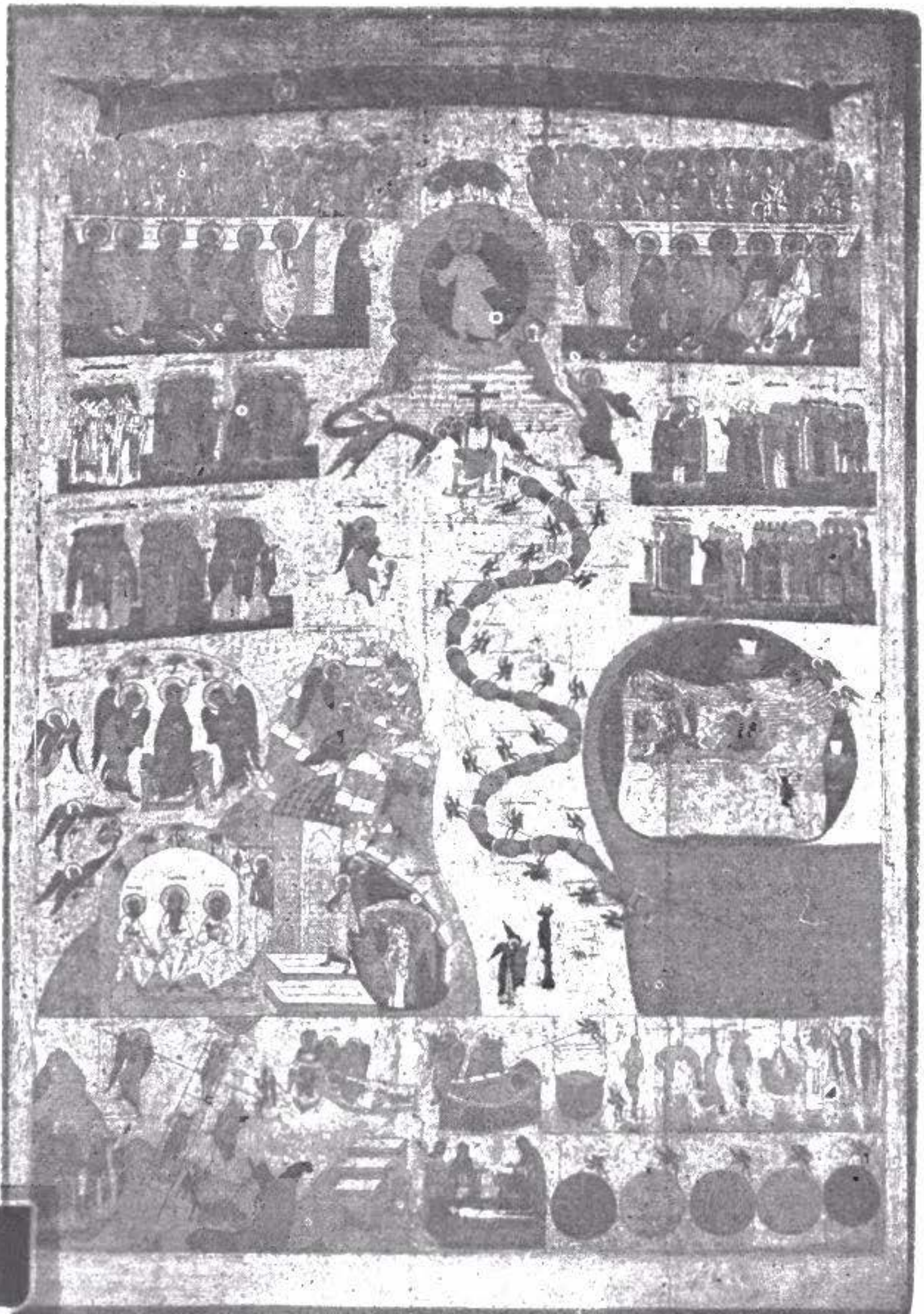

LETTERS

In this part of *The Orthodox Word* we share with our readers a few of the letters we receive, revealing — if only to a small degree — some of the Christian concerns and experiences of the "little flock" which tries to be faithful to Christ in these latter times. To facilitate a free expression of views, most of the letters are published without full signatures, but the names of all writers are known to the editors. All comments of the editors are in italics.

ORTHODOXY IN SWEDEN

You ask me about converts in Sweden. Yes, there are some — I would say about 20 or 25, of which some 12 to 15 are active. Swedish society is not a good ground for spirituality. Politics are involved in the churches, except in the Orthodox and Pentecostal congregations. The most fashionable question today is the question of female "priests," and this is a good example of the spiritual ground in Sweden (this question is pushed by left-wing feminist non-believers, and you can imagine the quality of the debate). Sweden is beautiful, but from the point of view of spirituality the Orthodox congregations are oases in a large and very dry desert. And even among the Orthodox can be found signs of decadence. Last year a church in the block next to ours was bought by the Greek Metropolia and a small "so-to-say" iconostasis has been placed in an otherwise intact (Protestant) church. They have left the benches, for example, because they live in a "modern" and "highly developed" country.

There is a parish in Copenhagen with a little 19th-century church and some 400 to 500 members. There is a parish in Oslo, Norway, too, with some 300 members, I guess, and with some very active members (converts) who publish a most interesting periodical, *Ortodoks Rost* ("The Voice of Orthodoxy"), I would say the best periodical in Scandinavia, mostly containing translations of high qualtiy from Russian and Greek writings, but also articles and so on. Our own parish has not so many activities, except the painting of icons. We have two good painters, and hopefully, two more coming in a couple of years.

D., Sweden

JAPAN

We of the English-speaking Orthodox community in Tokyo thank you for your worthy efforts to spread as well as preserve Orthodoxy. We are sharing one subscription of *The Orthodox Word* among four families and many single believers.

T., Tokyo

FRANCE

May I say how much we appreciate the lives of the saints of Orthodox Gaul that you have published. Several of us are English speaking, and we have been very pleased to read aloud in the refectory the articles from *The Orthodox Word*, not only on the lives of the Saints, but also the articles on monasticism.

Sr., France

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COVER: 16th-century Novgorod icon of the fate of the soul after death showing (below) the Ladder of St. John by which strugglers ascend in this life, and in the center (the path of twenty circles) the stations of the "toll-houses" with their demonic "tax-collectors" which the soul encounters just after death (see p 245; Icon from the Hann Collection, Pittsburgh, Pa.

Map on page 281: compiled from historical information provided by Auguste Longnon, *Geographie de la Gaule au VIe siecle*, Paris, 1878.

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The twenty stations of the aerial toll-houses
Detail of 16th-century Novgorod icon, Hann Collection, Pittsburgh, Pa.

Trapeza

THE SOUL AFTER DEATH

CONTEMPORARY "AFTER-DEATH" EXPERIENCES IN THE LIGHT OF ORTHODOX TEACHING ON THE AFTERLIFE

THE AERIAL TOLL-HOUSES

The particular place which the demons inhabit in this fallen world, and the place where the newly-departing souls of men encounter them — is the *air*. Bishop Ignatius further describes this realm, which must be clearly understood before today's "after-death" experiences become fully understandable.

"The word of God and the Spirit which acts together with it reveal to us, through its chosen vessels, that the space between heaven and earth, the whole azure expanse of the air which is visible to us under the heavens, serves as the dwelling for the fallen angels who have been cast down from heaven . . . The holy Apostle Paul calls the fallen angels the *spirits of wickedness under the heavens* (Eph. 6:12), and their chief *the prince of the powers of the air* (Eph. 2:2). The fallen angels are dispersed in a multitude throughout the entire transparent immensity which we see above us. They do not cease to disturb all human societies and every person separately; there is no evil deed, no crime, of which they might not be instigators and participants; they incline and instruct men towards sin by all possible means. *Your adversary the devil,* says the Holy Apostle Peter, *walketh about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour* (I Peter 5:8), both during our earthly life and after the separation of the soul from the body. When the soul of a Christian, leaving its earthly dwelling, begins to strive through the aerial spaces towards the homeland on high, the demons stop it, strive to find in it a kinship with themselves,

their sinfulness, their fall, and to drag it down to the hell *prepared for the devil and his angels* (Matt. 25:41). They act thus by the right which they have acquired" (Bishop Ignatius, *Collected Works*, vl.o III, pp. 132-133).

After the fall of Adam, Bishop Ignatius continues, when paradise was closed to man and a cherubim with a flaming sword was set to guard it (Gen. 3:24), the chief of the fallen angels, satan, together with the hordes of spirits subject to him, "stood on the path from earth to paradise, and from that time to the saving suffering and life-giving death of Christ he did not allow on this path a single human soul when it departed from the body. The gates of heaven were closed to men forever. Both the righteous and sinners descended to hell (after death). The eternal gates and the impassable way were opened (only) for our Lord Jesus Christ" (pp. 134-135). After our redemption by Jesus Christ, "all who have openly rejected the Redeemer comprise the inheritance of satan: their souls, after the separation from the body, descend straight to hell. But Christians who are inclined to sin are also unworthy of being immediately translated from earthly life to blessed eternity. Justice itself demands that these inclinations to sin, these betrayals of the Redeemer should be weighed and evaluated. A judging and distinguishing are required in order to define the degree of a Christian soul's inclination to sin, in order to define what predominates in it — eternal life or eternal death. The unhypocritical Judgment of God awaits every Christian soul after its departure from the body, as the holy Apostle Paul has said: *It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgment* (Heb. 9:27).

"For the testing of souls as they pass through the spaces of the air there have been established by the dark powers separate judgment places and guards in a remarkable order. In the layers of the under-heaven, from earth to heaven itself, stand guarding legions of fallen spirits. Each division is in charge of a special form of sin and tests the soul in it when the soul reaches this division. The aerial demonic guards and judgment places are called in the Patristic writings the *toll-houses*, and the spirits who serve in them are called the *tax-collectors* (vol. III, p. 136).

How To Understand The Toll-Houses

Perhaps no aspect of Orthodox eschatology has been so misunderstood as this phenomenon of the aerial toll-houses. Many graduates of today's modernist Orthodox seminaries are inclined to dismiss the whole phenomenon as some kind of "later addition" to Orthodox teaching, or as some kind of "imaginary" realm without foundation in Scriptural or Patristic texts or in spiritual reality. Such students are the victims of a rationalistic education which is lacking in a refined awareness of the different levels of reality which are often described in Orthodox texts, as well as of the different levels of meaning often present in Scriptural and Patristic writings. The modern rationalistic over-emphasis on the "literal" meaning of texts and a "realistic" or this-worldly understanding of the events described in Scripture and in Lives of Saints — have tended to obscure or even blot out entirely the spiritual meanings and spiritual experiences which are often primary in Orthodox sources. Therefore, Bishop Ignatius — who on the one hand was a "sophisticated" modern intellectual, and on the other a true and simple child of the Church — can well serve as a bridge on which today's Orthodox intellectuals might find their way back to the true tradition of Orthodoxy.

Before presenting further Bishop Ignatius' teaching on the aerial toll-houses, let us make note of the cautions of two Orthodox thinkers, one modern and one ancient, for those who enter upon the investigation of other-worldly reality.

In the 19th century, Metropolitan Macarius of Moscow, in his discussion of the state of souls after death, writes: "One must note that, just as in general in the depictions of the objects of the spiritual world for us who are clothed in flesh, certain features that are more or less sensuous and anthropomorphic are unavoidable — so in particular these features are unavoidably present also in the detailed teaching of the toll-houses which the human soul passes through after the separation from the body. And therefore one must firmly remember the instruction which the angel made to St. Macarius of Alexandria when he had just begun telling him of the toll-houses: 'Accept earthly things here as the weakest kind of depiction

of heavenly things.' One must picture the toll-houses not in a sense that is crude and sensuous, but — as far as possible for us — in a spiritual sense, and not be tied down to details which, in the various writers and various accounts of the Church herself, are presented in various ways, even though the basic idea of the toll-houses is one and the same."*

Some specific examples of such details which are not to be interpreted in a "crude and sensuous" way are given by St. Gregory the Dialogist in the Fourth Book of his *Dialogues* which, as we have already seen, is devoted specifically to the question of life after death.

Thus, when describing the after-death vision of a certain Reparatus, who saw a sinful priest being burned atop a huge pyre, St. Gregory notes: "The pyre of wood which Reparatus saw does not mean that wood is burned in hell. It was meant, rather, to give him a vivid picture of the fires of hell, so that, in describing them to the people, they might learn to fear the eternal fire through their experience with natural fire" *(Dialogues,* IV, 32, pp. 229-230).

Again, after St. Gregory has described how one man was sent back after death because of a "mistake" — someone else with the same name being the one who was actually called out of life (this has occurred also in today's "after-death" experiences) — St. Gregory adds, "Whenever this occurs, a careful consideration will reveal that it was not an error, but a warning. In His unbounded mercy, the good God allows some souls to return to their bodies shortly after death, so that the sight of hell might at last teach them to fear the eternal punishments in which words alone could not make them believe" (*Dialogues,* IV, 37, p. 237).

And when one person in an after-death vision saw dwellings of gold in paradise, St. Gregory comments: "Surely, no one with common sense will take the phrase literally . . . Since the reward of eternal glory is won by generosity in almsgiving, it seems quite possible to build an eternal dwelling with gold" (*Dialogues,* IV, 37, p. 241).

Later we shall have some more to say on the difference

*Metropolitan Macarius of Moscow, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* (in Russian), St. Petersburg, 1883, vol. 2, p. 538.

between *visions* of the other world and actual "out-of-body" experiences there (the experiences of the toll-houses, and many of today's "after-death" experience,s clearly belong to the latter category); but for now it is sufficient for us to be aware that we must have a cautious and sober approach to all experiences of the other world. No one aware of Orthodox teaching would say that the toll-houses are not "real," are not actually *experienced* by the soul after death. But we must keep in mind that these experiences occur not in our crudely material world; that both time and space, while obviously present, are quite different from our earthly concepts of time and space; and that accounts of these experiences in earthly language invariably fall short of the reality. Anyone who is at home in the kind of Orthodox literature which describes after-death reality will normally know how to distinguish between the spiritual realities described there and the incidental details which may sometimes be expressed in symbolic or imaginative language. Thus, of course, there are no visible "houses" or "booths" in the air where "taxes" are collected, and where there is mention of "scrolls" or writing implements whereby sins are recorded, or "scales" by which virtues are weighed, or "gold" by which "debts" are paid — in all such cases we may properly understand these images to be figurative or interpretive devices used to express the spiritual reality which the soul faces at that time. Whether the soul actually *sees* these images at the time, due to its lifelong habit of seeing spiritual reality only through bodily forms, or later can *remember* the experience only by use of such images, or simply finds it impossible to *express* what it has experienced in any other way — this is all a very secondary question which does not seem to have been important to the Holy Fathers and writers of saints' lives who have recorded such experiences. What is certain is that there *is* a testing by demons, who appear in a frightful but human form, accuse the newly-departed of sins and literally try to seize the subtle body of the soul, which is grasped firmly by angels; and all this occurs in the air above us and can be seen by those whose eyes are open to spiritual reality.

Now let us return to Bishop Ignatius' exposition of the Orthodox teaching of the aerial toll-houses:

Patristic Testimony of the Toll-Houses

The teaching of the toll-houses is the teaching of the Church. *There is no doubt whatever* (emphasis in the original) that the holy Apostle Paul is speaking of them when he declares that Christians must do battle with the spirits of wickedness under the heavens (Eph. 6:12). We find this teaching in the most ancient Church tradition and in Church prayers" (vol. III, p. 138).

Bishop Ignatius quotes many Holy Fathers who teach concerning the toll-houses. Here we shall quote just a few.

St. Athanasius the Great, in his famous Life of St. Anthony the Great, describes how once St. Anthony, "at the approach of the ninth hour, after beginning to pray before eating food, was suddenly seized by the Spirit and raised up by angels into the heights. The aerial demons opposed his progress: the angels, disputing with them, demanded that the reasons of their opposition be set forth, because Anthony had no sins at all. The demons strove to set forth the sins committed by him from his very birth; but the angels closed the mouths of the slanderers, telling them that they should not count the sins from his birth which had already been blotted out by the grace of Christ; but let them present — if they have any — the sins he committed after he entered into monasticism and dedicated himself to God. In their accusation the demons uttered many brazen lies; but since their slanders were wanting in proof, a free path was opened for Anthony. Immediately he came to himself and saw that he was standing in the same place where he had stood up for prayer. Forgetting about food, he spent the whole night in tears and groanings, reflecting on the multitude of man's enemies, on the battle against such an army, on the difficulty of the path to heaven through the air, and on the words of the Apostle, who said: *Our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities and powers of this air* (Eph. 6:12; Eph. 2:2). The apostle, knowing

that the aerial powers are seeking only one thing, are concerned over it with all fervor, exert themselves and strive to deprive us of a free passage to heaven, exhorts: *Take up the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day* (Eph. 6:13), *that the adversary may be put to shame, having no evil thing to say of us* (Titus 2:8)."*

St. John Chrysostom, describing the hour of death, teaches: "Then we will need many prayers, many helpers, many good deeds, a great intercession from angels on the journey through the spaces of the air. If when travelling in a foreign land or a strange city we are in need of a guide, how much more necessary for us are guides and helpers to guide us past the invisible dignities and powers and world-rulers of this air, who are called persecutors and publicans and tax-collectors."**

St. Macarius the Great writes: "When you hear that there are rivers of dragons, and mouths of lions, and the dark powers under the heavens, and fire that burns and crackles in the members, you think nothing of it, not knowing that unless you receive *the earnest of the Holy Spirit* (II Cor. 1:22), they hold your soul as it departs from the body, and do not suffer you to rise to heaven."***

St. Isaiah the Recluse, a 6th-century Father of the Philokalia, teaches that Christians should "daily have death before our eyes and take care how to accomplish the departure from the body and how to pass by the powers of darkness who are to meet us in the air" (Homily 5:22). "When the soul leaves the body, angels accompany it; the dark powers come out to meet it, desiring to detain it, and testing it to see if they might find something of their own in it" (Homily 17).

Again, St. Hesychius, Presbyter of Jerusalem (5th century), teaches: "The hour of death will find us, it will come, and it will be impossible to escape it. Oh, if only the prince of the world and the air who is then to meet us might find

*Bishop Ignatius, vol. III, pp. 138-139; Life of St. Anthony, Eastern Orthodox Books ed., p. 41.

**Homily on Patience and Gratitude, appointed to be read at Orthodox church services on the seventh Saturday of Pascha and at funeral services.

****Fifty Spiritual Homilies*, 16:13; A. J. Mason tr., Eastern Orthodox Books, Willits, Ca., 1974, p. 141.

our iniquities as nothing and insignificant and might not be able to accuse us justly!" (Homily on Sobriety in the Philokalia.)

St. Gregory the Dialogist (+604), in his Homilies on the Gospel, writes: "One must reflect deeply on how frightful the hour of death will be for us, what terror the soul will then experience, what remembrance of all the evils, what forgetfulness of past happiness, what fear, and what apprehension of the Judge. Then the evil spirits will seek out in the departing soul its deeds; then they will present before its view the sins towards which they had disposed it, so as to draw their accomplice to torment. But why do we speak only of the sinful soul, when they come even to the chosen among the dying and seek out their own in them, if they have succeeded with them? Among men there was only One Who before His suffering fearlessly said: *Hereafter I talk not much with you: For the prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in Me* (John 14:30)" (Homilies on he Gospels, 39, on Luke 19:42-47; Bishop Ignatius, III, p. 278).

St. Ephraim the Syrian (+373) thus describes the hour of death and the judgment at the toll-houses: "When the fearful hosts come, when the divine takers-away command the soul to be translated from the body, when they draw us away by force and lead us away to the unavoidable judgment place — then, seeing them, the poor man . . . comes all into a shaking as if from an earthquake, is all in trembling . . . The divine takers-away, taking the soul, ascend in the air where stand the chiefs, the authorities and world-rulers of the opposing powers. These are our accusers, the fearful publicans, registrars, tax-collectors; they meet it on the way, register, examine, and count out the sins and debts of this man — the sins of youth and old age, voluntary and involuntary, committed in deed, word, and thought. Great is the fear here, great the trembling of the poor soul, indescribable the want which it suffers then from the incalculable multitudes of its enemies surrounding it there in myriads, slandering it so as not to allow it to ascend to heaven, to dwell in the light of the living, to enter the land of life. But the holy angels, taking the soul,

lead it away."*

The Divine services of the Orthodox Church also contain many references to the toll-houses. Thus, in the *Octoechos*, the work of St. John Damascene (8th century), we read: "O Virgin, in the hour of my death rescue me from the hands of the demons, and the judgment, and the accusation, and the frightful testing, and the bitter toll-houses, and the fierce prince, and the eternal condemnation, O Mother of God" (Tone 4, Friday, 8th Canticle of the Canon at Matins). Again: "When my soul shall be about to be released from the bond with the flesh, intercede for me, O Sovereign Lady . . . that I may pass unhindered through the princes of darkness standing in the air" (Tone 2, Saturday, Canticle 9). Bishop Ignatius cites seventeen other such examples from the Divine service books, which of course are not a complete list.

The most thorough discussion among the early Church Fathers of the doctrine of the aerial toll-houses is set forth in the Homily on the Departure of the Soul of St. Cyril of Alexandria (+444) which is always included in editions of the Slavonic Sequential Psalter (that is, the Psalter arranged for use in Divine services). Among much else in this Homily, St. Cyril says: "What fear and trembling await you, O soul, in the day of death! You will see frightful, wild, cruel, unmerciful and shameful demons, like dark Ethiopians, standing before you. The very sight of them is worse than any torment. The soul, seeing them, becomes agitated, is disturbed, troubled, seeks to hide, hastens to the angels of God. The holy angels hold the soul; passing with them through the air and rising, it encounters the toll-houses which guard the path from earth to heaven, detaining the soul and hindering it from ascending further. Each toll-house tests the sins corresponding to it; each sin, each passion has its tax collectors and testers."

Many other Holy Fathers, before and after St. Cyril, discuss or mention the toll-houses. After quoting many of them, the above-mentioned 19th-century historian of Church dogma concludes: "Such an uninterrupted, constant, and universal

*St. Ephraim the Syrian, *Collected Works* (in Russian), Moscow, 1882, vol. 3, pp. 383-385.

usage in the Church of the teaching of the toll-houses, especially among the teachers of the 4th century, indisputably testifies that it was handed down to them from the teachers of the preceding centuries and is founded on apostolic tradition."**

The Toll-houses in Lives of Saints

The Orthodox Lives of Saints contain numerous accounts — some of them very vivid — of how the soul passes through the toll-houses after death. The most detailed account is to be found in the Life of St. Basil the New (March 26), which describes the passage through the toll-houses of Blessed Theodora, as related by her in a vision to a fellow disciple of the Saint, Gregory. In this account twenty specific toll-houses are mentioned, with the kinds of sins tested in each set forth. Bishop Ignatius quotes this account at some length (vol. III, pp. 151-158). This account already exists in an English translation, however (*Eternal Mysteries Beyond the Grave,* pp. 69-87), and it contains nothing significant that is not to be found in other Orthodox sources on the toll-houses, so we shall omit it here in order to give some of these other sources. These other sources are less detailed, but follow the same basic outline of events.

In the account of the Soldier Taxiotes, for example (Lives of Saints, March 28), it is related that he returned to life after six hours in the grave and told of the following experience:

"When I was dying, I saw Ethiopians who appeared before me. Their appearance was very frightful; my soul beholding them was disturbed. Then I saw two splendid youths, and my soul leaped out into their arms. We began slowly to ascend in the air to the heights, as if flying, and we reached the toll-houses that guard the ascent and detain the soul of each man. Each toll-house tested a special form of sin: one lying, another envy, another pride; each sin has its own testers in the air. And I saw that the angels held all my good deeds in a little chest; taking them out, they would compare them with my evil deeds. Thus we passed by all the toll-houses. And when, near-

**Metropoliton Macarius of Moscow, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology,* vol. 2, p. 535.

ing the gates of heaven, we came to the toll-house of fornication, those who guard the way there detained me and presented to me all my fleshly deeds of fornication, committed from my childhood up to now. The angels who were leading me said: 'All the bodily sins which you committed in the city, God has forgiven, because you repented of them.' To this my adversaries said to me: 'But when you left the city, in the village you committed adultery with a farmer's wife.' The angels, hearing this and finding no good deed which could be measured out for my sin, left me and went away. Then the evil spirits seized me and, overwhelming me with blows, led me down to earth. The earth opened, and I was let down by narrow and foul-smelling descents into the underground prison of hell." (The rest of this Life in English may be read in *Eternal Mysteries Beyond the Grave,* pp. 169-171.)

Bishop Ignatius quotes also other experiences of the toll-houses in the Lives of St. Eustratius the Great Martyr (4th century, Dec. 13), St. Niphon of Constantia in Cyprus, who saw many souls ascending through the toll-houses (4th century, Dec. 23), St. Symeon the fool for Christ of Emesa (6th century, July 21), St. John the Merciful, Patriarch of Alexandria (7th century, *Prologue* for Dec. 19), St. Symeon of Wondrous Mountain (7th century, *Prologue* for March 13); and St. Macarius the Great (Jan. 19).

Bishop Ignatius was unacquainted with many early Orthodox sources in the West which were never translated into Greek or Russian; but these too abound in descriptions of the toll-houses. The *name* of "toll-houses," it would seem, is restricted to Eastern sources, but the *reality* described in Western sources is identical.

St. Columba, for example, the founder of the island monastery of Iona in Scotland (+597), many times in his life saw the battle of the demons in the air for the souls of the newly departed. St. Adamnan (+704) relates these in his Life of the Saint; here is one incident:

St. Columba called together his monks one day, telling them: "Now let us help by prayer the monks of the Abbot Comgell, drowning at this hour in the Lough of the Calf; for

behold, at this moment they are warring in the air against hostile powers who try to snatch away the soul of a stranger who is drowning along with them." Then, after prayer, he said: "Give thanks to Christ, for now the holy angels have met these holy souls, and have delivered that stranger and triumphantly rescued him from the warring demons."*

St. Boniface, the 8th-century Anglo-Saxon "Apostle to the Germans," relates in one of his letters the account given to him personally by a monk of the monastery at Wenlock who died and came back to life after some hours. "Angels of such pure splendor bore him up as he came forth from the body that he could not bear to gaze upon them . . . 'They carried me up,' he said, 'high into the air . . . ' He reported further that in the space of time while he was out of the body, a greater multitude of souls left their bodies and gathered in the place where he was than he had thought to form the whole race of mankind on earth. He said also that there was a crowd of evil spirits and a glorious choir of the higher angels. And he said that the wretched spirits and the holy angels had a violent dispute concerning the souls that had come forth from their bodies, the demons bringing charges against them and aggravating the burden of their sins, the angels lightening the burden and making excuses for them.

"He heard all his own sins, which he had committed from his youth on and had failed to confess or had forgotten or had not recognized as sins, crying out against him, each in its own voice, and accusing him grievously . . . Everything he had done in all the days of his life and had neglected to confess and many which he had not known to be sinful, all these were now shouted at him in terrifying words. In the same way the evil spirits, chiming in with the vices, accusing and bearing witness, naming the very times and places, brought proofs of his evil deeds . . . And so, with his sins all piled up and reckoned out, those ancient enemies declared him guilty and unquestionably subject to their jurisdiction.

"On the other hand,' he said, 'the poor little virtues which I had displayed unworthily and imperfectly spoke out in my

*St. Adamnan, *Life of St. Columba*, tr. by Wentworth Huyshe, London, George Routledge & Sons, Ltd., 1939, Part III, ch. 13, p. 207.

defense . . . And those angelic spirits in their boundless love defended and supported me, while the virtues, greatly magnified as they were, seemed to me far greater and more excellent than could ever have been practiced by my own strength.' "**

A Modern Experience of the Toll-houses

The reaction of a typical "enlightened" man of modern times when he personally encountered the toll-houses after his "clinical death" (which lasted for 36 hours) may be seen in the book already mentioned above, "Unbelievable for Many but Actually a True Occurrence." "Having taken me by the arms, the angels carried me right through the wall of the ward into the street. It already had grown dark, snow was silently falling in large flakes. I saw this, but the cold and in general the difference in temperature between the room and outside I did not feel. Evidently these like phenomena lost their significance for my changed body. We began quickly to ascend. And the degree to which we had ascended, the increasingly greater became the expanse of space that was revealed before our eyes, and finally it took on such terrifyingly vast proportions that I was seized with a fear from the realization of my insignificance in comparison to this desert of infinity . . .

"The conception of time was absent in my mental state at this time, and I do not know how long we were moving upwards, when suddenly there was heard at first an indistinct noise, and following this, having emerged from somewhere, with shrieks and rowdy laughter, a throng of some hideous beings began rapidly to approach us.

"Evil spirits! — I suddenly comprehended and appraised with unusual rapidity that resulted from the horror I experienced at that time, a horror of a special kind and until then never before experienced by me. Evil spirits! O, how much irony, how much of the most sincere kind of laughter this would have aroused in me but a few days ago. Even a few hours ago somebody's report, not even that that he saw evil spirits with his own eyes, but only that he believed in their

**_The Letters of Saint Boniface_, tr. by Ephraim Emerton, Octagon Books (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux), New York, 1973, pp. 25-27.

existence as in something fundamentally real, would have aroused a similar reaction! As was proper for an 'educated' man at the close of the 19th century, I understood this to mean foolish inclinations, passions in a human being, and that is why the very word itself had for me, not the significance of a name, but a term which defined a certain abstract conception. And suddenly this certain 'abstract conception' appeared before me as a living personification! . . .

"Having surrounded us on all sides, with shrieks and rowdy sounds the evil spirits demanded that I be given over to them; they tried somehow to seize and tear me away from the angels, but evidently did not dare to do this. In the midst of their rowdy howling, unimaginable and just as repugnant to one's hearing as their sight was for my eyes, I sometimes caught up words and whole phrases. 'He is ours: he has renounced God' — they suddenly cried out almost in unison, and here they lunged at us with such boldness that for a moment fear froze the flow of all thought in my mind. "That is a lie! That is untrue!' — I wanted to shout, coming to myself; but an obliging memory bound my tongue. In some way unknown to me, I suddenly recalled such a slight, insignificant occurrence, which in addition was related to so remote a period of my youth that, it seems, I in no way could have been able to recall it to mind."

Here the author recalls an incident from his school years: Once, in a philosophical discussion such as students have, one of his comrades expressed the opinion: "Why must I believe? Is it also not possible that God does not exist?" To this the author replied: "Maybe not." Now, confronted with the demon-accusers of the toll-houses, the author recalls:

"This phrase was in the full sense of the word an 'idle statement': the unreasonable talk of my friend could not have aroused within me a doubt in the exisence of God. I did not particularly listen to his talking — and now it turned out that this idle statement of mine did not disappear without leaving a trace in the air, I had to justify myself, to defend myself from the accusation that was directed against me, and in such a manner the New Testament statement was verified in practice: We really shall have to give an account for all our idle words,

if not by the Will of God, Who sees the secrets of man's heart, then by the anger of the enemy of salvation.

"This accusation evidently was the strongest argument that the evil spirits had for my perdition, they seemed to derive new strength in this for the daring of their attacks on me, and now with furious bellowing they spun about us, preventing us from going any further.

"I recalled a prayer and began praying, appealing for help to those holy ones whose names I knew and whose names came to mind. But this did not frighten my enemies. A sad, ignorant Christian only in name, I now, it seems, almost for the first time in my life remembered Her Who is called the Intercessor for Christians.

"And evidently my appeal to Her was intense, evidently my soul was filled with terror, because hardly had I remembered and pronounced Her name, when about us there suddenly appeared a kind of white mist which soon began to enfold within itself the ugly throng of evil spirits. It concealed them from my eyes before they could withdraw from us. Their bellowing and cackling was still heard for a long while, but according to how it gradually weakened in intensity and became more dull, I was able to judge that the terrible pursuit was gradually being left behind."*

The Toll-houses Experienced Before Death

Thus, it may be seen from innumerable clear examples how important and vivid an experience for the soul is the encounter with the demons of the aerial toll-houses after death. This experience, however, is not necessarily limited to the time just after death. We have seen above that the experience of St. Anthony the Great with the toll-houses was during an "out-of-body" experience while standing at prayer. Similarly, St. John of the Ladder describes an experience which occurred to one monk *before* his death:

"On the day before his death,he went into an ecstasy of mind and with open eyes he looked to the right and left of his

*"Unbelievable for Many but Actually a True Occurrence," in *Orthodox Life*, July-August, 1976.

bed and, as if he were being called to account by someone, in the hearing of all the bystanders he said: 'Yes indeed, that is true; but that is why I fasted for so many years.' And then again: 'Yes, it is quite true; but I wept and served the brethren.' And again: 'No, you are slandering me.' And sometimes he would say: 'Yes, it is true. Yes, I do not know what to say to this. But in God there is mercy.' And it was truly an awful and horrible sight — this invisible and merciless inquisition. And what was most terrible, he was accused of what he had not done. How amazing! Of several of his sins the hesychast and hermit said: 'I do not know what to say to this,' although he had been a monk for nearly forty years and had the gift of tears . . . And while thus being called to account he was parted from his body, leaving us in uncertainty as to his judgment, or end, or sentence, or how the trial ended."**

Indeed, the encounter with the toll-houses after death is only a specific and final form of the general battle in which each Christian soul is engaged during his whole lifetime. Bishop Ignatius writes: "Just as the resurrection of the Christian soul from the death of sin is accomplished during its earthly wandering, precisely so is mystically accomplished, here on earth, its testing by the aerial powers, its captivity by them or deliverance from them; at the journey through the air (after death) this freedom or captivity is only made manifest" (Vol. III, p. 159). Some saints, such as Macarius the Great — whose passage through the toll-houses was seen by several of his disciples — ascend through the demonic "tax-collectors" without opposition, because they have already fought them and won the battle in this life. Here is the incident from his Life:

"When the time came for the death of St. Macarius, the Cherubim who was his guardian angel, accompanied by a multitude of the heavenly host, came for his soul. With the ranks of angels there also descended choirs of apostles, prophets, martyrs, hierarchs, monks and righteous ones. The demons disposed themselves in ranks and crowds in their toll-houses in order to behold the passage of the God-bearing soul. It began to ascend. Standing far from it, the dark spirits shouted

**_Ladder of Divine Ascent_, tr. by Archimandrite Lazarus Moore, Eastern Orthodox Books, 1977, pp. 120-121.

from their toll-houses: 'O Macarius, what glory you have been vouchsafed!' The humble man answered them: 'No! I still fear, because I do not know whether I have done anything good.' Meanwhile he swiftly ascended to heaven. From other higher toll-houses the aerial powers again cried out: 'Just so! You have escaped us, Macarius.' 'No,' he replied, 'I still need to flee.' When he already had come to the gates of heaven, lamenting out of malice and envy, they cried out: 'Just so! You did escape us, Macarius!' He replied: 'Guarded by the power of my Christ, I have escaped your nets!' " *(Patericon of Scetis.)*

"The great saints of God pass through the aerial guards of the dark powers with such great freedom because during earthly life they enter into uncompromising battle with them and, gaining the victory over them, acquire in the depths of their heart complete freedom from sin, become the temple and sanctuary of the Holy Spirit, making their rational dwelling-place inaccessible for the fallen angels" (Bishop Ignatius, vol. III, pp. 158-159).

The Particular Judgment

In Orthodox dogmatic theology the passage through the aerial toll-houses is a part of the *particular judgment* by means of which the fate of the soul is determined until the Last Judgment. Both the particular judgment and the Last Judgment are accomplished by angels, who serve as the instruments of God's justice: *At the end of the world, the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire* (Matt. 13:49).

Orthodox Christians are fortunate to have the teaching of the aerial toll-houses and the particular judgment clearly set forth in numerous Patristic writings and Lives of Saints, but actually any person who carefully reflects on nothing more than the Holy Scripture will come to a very similar teaching. Thus, the Protestant Evangelist Billy Graham writes in his book on angels: "At the moment of death the spirit departs from the body and moves through the atmosphere. But the

Scripture teaches us that the devil lurks there. He is 'the prince of the power of the air' (Eph. 2:2). If the eyes of our understanding were opened, one would probably see the air filled with demons, the enemies of Christ. If satan could hinder the angel of Daniel for three weeks on his mission to earth, we can imagine the opposition a Christian may encounter at death . . . The moment of death is satan's final opportunity to attack the true believer; but God has sent His angels to guard us at that time."*

The Toll-houses: A Touchstone of Authentic After-death Experience

All that has been described in this chapter is quite clearly not the same as the "flashbacks" of one's life that are so often described today in "after-death" experiences. The latter experience — which often occurs before death also — has nothing of the Divine, nothing of judgment, about it; it seems to be rather a psychological experience, a recapitulation of one's life under the scrutiny of nothing more than one's own conscience. The lack of judgment and even the "sense of humor" which many have described in the invisible being who attends the "flashbacks" is, first of all, a reflection of the terrible lack of seriousness which most people in the Western world now have with regard to life and death. And this is also why even the Hindus of "backward" India have more frightening experiences of death than do most Westerners: even without the true enlightenment of Christianity, they have still preserved a more serious attitude to life than have most people in the frivolous "post-Christian" West.

The passage through the toll-houses — which is a kind of touchstone of authentic after-death experience — is not described at all in today's experiences, and the reason for this is not far too seek. From many signs — the absence of the angels who come for the soul, the absence of judgment, the frivolousness of many of the accounts, even the very shortness

*Billy Graham, *Angels, God's Secret Messengers*, Doubleday, New York, 1975, pp. 150-151.

of the time involved (usually some five to ten minutes, compared with the several hours to several days in the incidents from saints' Lives and other Orthodox sources) — it is clear that today's experiences, although sometimes very striking and not explainable by any natural laws known to medical science, are not very profound. If these are actual experiences of death, then they involve only the very beginning of the soul's after-death journey; they occur in the ante-room of death, as it were, before God's decree for the soul has become final (manifested by the coming of the angels for the soul), while there is still a possibility for the soul to return to the body by natural means.

It still remains for us, however, to give a satisfactory explanation of the experiences that are occurring today. What are these beautiful landscapes that are often seen? Where is this "heavenly" city that is beheld? What is this whole "out of the body" realm which is undeniably being contacted today?

The answer to these questions may be found in an investigation of a rather different kind of literature from the Orthodox sources mentioned above — a literature which is also based on personal experience, and is much more thorough in its observations and conclusions than the "after-death" experience of today. This is the literature to which Dr. Moody and other investigators are also turning, and in which they are finding indeed remarkable parallels to the clinical cases that have inspired the contemporary interest in life after death.

To be continued.

The Teaching of St. Symeon the New Theologian

continued

HOMILY 1

The Transgression of Adam and Our Redemption by Jesus Christ

1. IN WHAT CONSISTED THE TRANSGRESSION OF ADAM?

THE FIRST-CREATED ADAM, being in paradise, fell, at the instigation of the serpent, into pride; and having dreamed of being a god, as the devil had told him, he tasted of the tree from which God had commanded him not to eat. For this he was given over to great chastisements — to corruption and death, for the humbling of his pride. But when God condemns for something, he gives also a sentence, and His sentence becomes deed and an eternal chastisement, and there is no longer any possibility of annihilating this chastisement which has come from the decree of God.

But think now: Adam sinned with a great sin because he did not believe the words of God, but believed the words of the serpent. Compare God and the serpent, and you will see how great was the sin of most-wise Adam. In his great wisdom he had given names to all the animals (Gen. 2:19-20). But when with his whole soul he believed the serpent and not God, then the Divine grace which had rested on him stepped away from him, so that he became the enemy of God by reason of the unbelief which he had shown to His words.

Adam thought that God envied him and did not wish that he also should know good and evil; and he thought that God had commanded him not to taste of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in order that he might not become a god like unto God Who had created him. And he tasted, and immediately he knew his nakedness, and instead of becoming a god he became corruptible, and as corruptible, mortal.

2. HOW BY REASON OF HIS TRANSGRESSION DID ALL MEN BECOME CORRUPTIBLE AND MORTAL?

And behold, as you see, the sentence of God remains forever as an eternal chastisement. And all of us men became both corruptible and mortal, and there is nothing that might set aside this great and frightful sentence. And when there is no possibility to set aside this sentence, then what benefit is there in wisdom or in wealth, or in power, or in the whole world? For this reason the Almighty Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, came so as to humble Himself in place of Adam. And truly He humbled Himself, even to the death of the Cross. The word of the Cross, as the Scripture says, is this: *Cursed is everyone that hangeth upon a tree* (Gal. 3:13).

Adam, without having any need for this, took from the fruit of that tree (from which God had commanded him not to taste, threatening him that if he should only taste of it he should die); he tasted and died. One should know that since a man has a body and a soul, therefore he has two deaths also: one, the death of the soul, and the other, the death of the body. Likewise, there are also two immortalities, one of the soul and one of the body, even though both of them are in one man, for the soul and the body are one man.

Thus, in soul Adam died immediately, as soon as he had tasted; and later, after nine hundred and thirty years, he died also in body. For, as the death of the body is the separation from it of the soul, so the death of the soul is the separation from it of the Holy Spirit, by Whom God Who had created him had been pleased that man be overshadowed, so that he might live like the angels of God, who, being always enlightened by the Holy Spirit, remain immovable towards evil. Later, for this reason, the whole human race also became such as our forefather Adam became through the fall — mortal, that is, both in soul and body. Man such as God had created him no longer existed in the world. And there was no possibility that anyone should become such as Adam was before the transgression of the commandment. But it was necessary that there should be such a man.

3. HOW DID THE MERCIFUL AND MAN-LOVING GOD, THROUGH THE DISPENSATION OF THE INCARNATION, DELIVER THE HUMAN RACE FROM CORRUPTION AND DEATH?

And thus God, desiring to have such a man as He had created Adam in the beginning, sent in the latter times to the earth His Only-begotten Son, and He came and was Incarnate, accepting a perfect humanity, so as to be perfect God and perfect man, and thus the Divinity had a man worthy of It.

And behold the Man! Such a One there has never been, there is not, and there shall never be. But why did Christ become such a one? In order to keep the law of God and His commandments, and so as to enter into battle with and conquer the devil. Both the one and the other occurred in Him by themselves; for if Christ is that very God Who gave the commandments and the law, then how could He not keep that law and those commandments which He Himself had given? And if He is God, as He is in truth, then how is it possible for Him to be deceived or deluded by any trickery of the devil? The devil, to be sure, being blind and senseless, rose up against Him with warfare. But this was allowed so that there might be performed a certain great and fearful mystery, namely, so that Christ, the Sinless One, should suffer, and through this Adam, who had sinned, might receive forgiveness. For this also, in place of the tree of knowledge, there was the Cross; in place of the stepping of the feet by which our first ancestors walked to the forbidden tree, and in place of their stretching out of their hands in order to take of the fruit of the tree, there were nailed to the Cross the innocent feet and hands of Christ; in place of the tasting of the fruit, there was the tasting of gall and vinegar, and in place of the death of Adam, the death of Christ.

And then what happened? Christ lay in the grave three days, for the sake of the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity, so as to show that even though He alone, the Son, became Incarnate and suffered, still the dispensation is the work of the All-Holy Trinity.

And in what does this dispensation consist? One Person of the Holy Trinity, namely the Son and Word of God, having become Incarnate, offered Himself in the flesh as a sacrifice to the Divinity of the Father, and of the Son Himself, and of the Holy Spirit, in order that the first transgression of Adam might be benevolently forgiven for the sake of this great and fearful work, that is, for the sake of this sacrifice of Christ, and in order that by its power there might be performed another new birth and re-creation of man in Holy Baptism, in which we also are cleansed by water mingled with the Holy

Spirit. From that time people are baptized in water, are immersed in it and taken out from it three times, in the image of the three-day burial of the Lord, and after they die in it to this whole evil world, in the third bringing out from it they are already alive, as if resurrected from the dead, that is, their souls are brought to life and again receive the grace of the Holy Spirit as Adam had it before the transgression. Then they are anointed with Holy Myrrh, and by means of it are anointed with Jesus Christ, and are fragrant in a way above nature. Having become in this way worthy of being associates of God, they taste His Flesh and drink His Blood, and by means of the sanctified bread and wine become of one Body and Blood with God Who was Incarnate and offered Himself as a sacrifice.

After this it is no longer possible that sin should reign and tyrannize over them, for they are gods by grace. Since Adam had fallen under the curse, and through him all people also who proceed from him, therefore the sentence of God concerning this could in no way be annihilated; and therefore Christ was for us a curse, through being hung upon the tree of the Cross, so as to offer Himself as a sacrifice to His Father, as has been said, and to annihilate the sentence of God by the superabundant worth of the sacrifice. For what is greater and higher than God? Just as in this whole visible creation there is nothing higher than man (for everything visible was created for man), so also God is incomparably higher than everything created, and nothing can enter into comparison with Him, not the whole visible and invisible creation.

Thus God, Who is incomparably higher than the whole visible and invisible creation, accepted human nature, which is higher than the whole visible creation, and offered it as a sacrifice to His God and Father. Being shamed by such a sacrifice (I speak thus), and honoring it, the Father could not leave it in the hands of death. Therefore He annihilated His sentence and resurrected from the dead first of all and at the beginning Him Who had given Himself as a sacrifice for the redemption and as a replacement for men who are of the same race as Himself; and afterwards, in the last day of the end of this world, He will resurrect also all men. Moreover, the souls of those who believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in this great and fearful sacrifice, God resurrects in the present life; and a sign of this resurrection is the grace of the Holy Spirit which He gives to the soul of every Christian, as if giving a new soul. Such a soul of a Christian is called "trustworthy" (or "faithful"), because to it is entrusted the Holy Spirit of God and it has accepted Him — the Spirit of God Who is life eternal, since the Holy Spirit is eternal God Who proceeds from the eternal God and Father.

4. AND IN WHAT CONSISTS THE MYSTERY AND THE THREE-DAY BURIAL OF OUR LORD, GOD AND SAVIOUR JESUS CHRIST?

Inasmuch, therefore, as the Cross has become as it were the altar of this fearful sacrifice — for on the Cross the Son of God died for the fall of man — therefore the Cross is justly revered and worshipped and depicted as the sign of the common resurrection of all men, so that those who bow down before the wood of the Cross might be delivered from the curse of Adam and receive the blessing and grace of God for the doing of every virtue. For Christians the Cross is magnification, glory, and power: for all our power is in the power of Christ Who was crucified; all our sinfulness is mortified by the death of Christ on the Cross; and all our exaltation and all our glory are in the humility of God, Who humbled Himself to such an extent that He was pleased to die even between evil-doers and thieves. For this very reason Christians who believe in Christ sign themselves with the sign of the Cross not simply, not just as it happens, not carelessly, but with all heedfulness, with fear and with trembling and with extreme reverence. For the image of the Cross shows the reconciliation and friendship into which man has entered with God.

Therefore the demons also fear the image of the Cross, and they do not endure to see the sign of the Cross depicted even in the air, but they flee from this immediately knowing that the Cross is the sign of the friendship of men with God, and that they, as apostates and enemies of God, being far from His Divine face, do not have any longer freedom to draw near to those who have become reconciled with God and united with Him, and they can no longer tempt them. And if it seems that they tempt certain Christians, let everyone know that they battle against those who have not properly understood the exalted mystery of the Cross.

But those who have understood this mystery and in very fact have known in experience the authority and power which the Cross has over demons, have likewise understood that the Cross gives the soul strength, power, meaning, and divine wisdom. These with great joy cry out: *Far be it from me to glory, save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world is crucified to me and I unto the world* (Gal. 6:14). And thus, inasmuch as the sign of the Cross is great and fearful, every Christian has the duty to make it with fear and trembling, with reverence and heedfulness, and not simply, and not as it happens, simply out of habit and carelessly: for according to the degree of the reverence which one has towards the cross, he receives corresponding power and help from God. To Him may there be glory and dominion forever. Amen.

HOMILY 10

Adam's Sin and Our Salvation

1. GOD IN THE BEGINNING DID NOT CREATE MAN INFIRM, SO THAT HE WOULD SIN OUT OF INFIRMITY AS HE NOW SINS

IN CONSIDERING THE SIN by which Adam sinned when he was in the glory and enjoyment of paradise, no one will find that it was done out of necessity or infirmity, or for any good reason at all, but solely out of disdain for the commandment of God, out of the ingratitude and apostasy which Adam showed with relation to God his Creator. Besides, there was given him by God an opportunity for repentance, that he might obtain forgiveness; and this was for the two following reasons: first, because he had not himself devised the evil, but he was deceived and led into error by the counsel of the devil; secondly, because he was clothed with flesh, for Adam as a creature was subject to change, but could not fall into complete apostasy from God, as did the devil and the demons who followed him, who did not have flesh.

Therefore, a great hope for obtaining mercy is left to man now, when he is clothed with that certain natural infirmity which human nature assumed after the fall, and by reason of which he sins. Still, this cannot justify his sins, but should only inspire him to hasten to God the sooner with a feeling of gratitude to Him for giving him the opportunity for repentance, and to ask of Him forgiveness and strength — forgiveness of his sins, because even though he sinned out of human infirmity, he should have withstood even unto death; and strength, so as to receive from God power, by the grace of Christ, not to sin, but to do only good deeds which are pleasing to God.

2. ONE THING IS THE SIN OF ADAM, AND ANOTHER THE OTHER SINS BY WHICH WE SIN NOW

None of us has ever sinned nor can ever sin as Adam sinned, because there is not and never has been anyone equal to him in everything — anyone, that is, like him in not being subject to misfortunes, without care, free from every natural need. For, behold, what a chastisement was ordained for Adam and his descendents for transgressing the commandment in paradise — thirst, hunger, cold in winter, heat in summer, and from these the need for food, drink, clothing and shelter, for which are necessary labor, troubling oneself, and sweat for one's whole life. And what follows further? Impatience by reason of all the above-indicated needs, and opposition to the decree of God. For every

man who is born in the present life, not knowing that all such temporal chastisements have been laid upon the whole human race for the transgression of our forefather Adam, receives them not with thanksgiving, but brazenly murmurs because of them; and desiring to find repose from his needs he envies, strives to acquire more than is needful, takes what belongs to another, is unjust.

And so it is these that are our sins, that is, that we do not patiently bear the temporal chastisements of God and do not give thanks for them but becoming presumptuous as if we were enemies of God we go in a certain sense against that Divine decree that states *in the sweat of thy face thou shall eat thy bread* (Gen. 3:19), and we exert all our strength so as to find repose and we do not find it because there is no opportunity for us to escape from labors and sweats, and from this being yoked to needs, no matter what we might do.

Therefore, fortunate is he who endures all these temporal chastisements with gratitude, confessing that he has been justly condemned to them for the ancestral sin. Yea, he will find repose from his labors; for by reason of these chastisements the All-good God has given death to men, so that those who bear them with gratitude might rest from them for a time, and then might be resurrected and glorified in the day of judgment through the new Adam, the sinless Jesus Christ and God *Who was delivered up for our trespasses, and was raised for our justification* (Rom. 4:25).

3. WHAT HAS BEEN GIVEN YOU FROM CHRIST, AND WHAT IS SIN

God, who came into the world and became man, offered to men the following two great goods: He united the Divine nature with human nature so that man might become a god, and in this man who has become a god by grace the Most Holy Trinity has mystically come to dwell. And how after this can one who has been vouchsafed such great gifts sin, as John the Theologian and Evangelist says: *Whosoever is born of God doeth no sin, and he cannot sin, because he is born of God* (I John 3:9).

And what is sin? Evil thoughts, words, and deeds. And so one who truly has been vouchsafed the good things of God's becoming man cannot allow any such things into himself. He can never allow them, and if he allows them even a little bit once, he ceases already to be what he is. He who thinks sometimes good things and sometimes bad, he whose speech is sometimes good and somtimes bad, he who sometimes does good deeds and sometimes evil — is like a man who sometimes goes to the temple of God and sometimes to the temple of idols, sometimes worships God and sometimes the demons. Can someone in whom God has come to dwell be such a one?

Therefore a Christian must always think and speak and do only what

is good, for as the Lord says, *A house divided against itself shall not stand* (Matt. 12:25). But one must always keep in mind also that it is impossible for thoughts always to be good (and from such thoughts are usually produced words and deeds which are similar to them), unless first Christ the Lord has come to dwell in the mind, for which we should struggle as far as we have strength — that is, so that Christ the Lord should come to dwell in our mind.

4. GOD BECAME MAN IN ORDER TO DESTROY THE WORKS OF THE DEVIL

John the Theologian says, *To this end was the Son of God manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil* (I John 3:8) The works of the devil are every kind of sin: envy, lying, cunning, hatred, hostility, remembrance of wrongs, slander, anger, rage, pride, vainglory, lack of mercy, covetousness, thievery, unrighteousness, evil lust, quarrelsomeness, dissatisfaction, irritibility, ridicule, making oaths, forgetfulness of God, lack of human mercy, and every other evil. And so for those who are called Christians and do such works of the devil, what benefit is there from the fact that they are called Christians, when the manifestation of the Son of God has not destroyed in them these works of the devil?

If anyone will say that some of those who are like this explain the Divine Scripture, theologize, preach Orthodox dogmas — let them know that it is not in this that the work of Christ consists. John the Theologian does not say, *to this end was the Son of God manifested,* that certain ones should theologize and orthodoxize (that is, pride themselves on their Orthodoxy — *tr. note*), but *that He might destroy the works of the devil.* Concerning such ones I shall say that first one must clean the vessel of every filth and then place in it the myrrh, lest the myrrh itself become defiled, and in place of fragrance there should come from it an evil smell. The Son of God, the Word, did not become man in order only that men should believe in the Holy Trinity, glorify It, and theologize about It, but in order to destroy the works of the devil. In whomever among those who have received the faith of Christ the works of the devil shall be destroyed, to him may be entrusted the mysteries of theology and Orthodox dogmas. But those in whom such works have not been destroyed and who turn out to be tangled up in them for the dishonor and blasphemy of God, in essence such ones stand in the same rank with the pagans to whom it is forbidden and prohibited even to enter into the temple of the Lord and to pray to God there, and not merely to read the Divine Scripture and explain it, as has been written, *But unto the sinner God hath said: Why declarest thou My statutes and takest up My covenant in thy mouth? Thou hast hated chastisement and hast cast out My words behind thee* (Ps. 49:16-17). He who does not take to his heart the laws of God hates the chastisement and correction which are inspired by the words of the Lord and stops up his ears lest he hear the Word of

God which declares concerning the future judgment and the recompense to sinners, or concerning the unquenchable fire of gehenna and the other torments of hell, or concerning the eternal judgment from which no one can escape once he has been subjected to it. He who does not strive with all his strength to have the commandments of God ever before his eyes and to keep them, but rather disdains them and prefers what is contrary to them and brings this into act — such a one casts the words of God behind him.

I shall explain this by the following example. When God clearly commands, *Repent ye, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand* (Matt. 4:17), and again, *Strive to enter in by the narrow door* (Luke 13:24), and he who hears this does not only not wish to repent and to force himself to go through the narrow door, but spends all the days of his life in great carelessness, adding to his previous sins every hour new ones, and gives repose and comfort to his body above what is needful and even more than is decent, which serves as a sign of the broad and spacious path which leads to perdition and not the narrow and most sorrowful path which leads to eternal life — then is it not evident that such a one casts behind him the words of God, that is, disdains them and does his own will, or to say it better, the will of the devil? Indeed, St. David thus depicts one who casts behind him the words of God: *If thou sawest a thief, thou didst run with him; and with the adulterer thou hast set thy portion. Thy mouth hath abounded with evil, and thy tongue hath woven deceits. Thou didst sit down and speak against thy brother, and against thine own mother's son didst thou lay a stumbling-block; these things thou didst, and I kept silence. Thou didst think an iniquity, that I should be like unto thee; I will reprove thee, and bring thy sins before thy face. Wherefore, understand these things, ye that forget God, lest He snatch you away and there be none to deliver you* (Ps. 49:19-23).

Do you see how such a one has forgotten God and is worthy to receive greater punishment than the godless who do not know God at all? For, having known God, as the Apostle says, he does not glorify Him as God, but rather abuses Him, doing the works of the devil. Therefore he is an enemy of God, even though he might seem to be the most trustworthy teacher of divine dogmas and Orthodox theology. And it is impossible that such a one should faithfully proclaim the divine dogmas and theologize; for how is it possible that a mind which is darkened by a defiled conscience should think rightly and purely? Only he who has been released from the works of the devil and constantly contains God in his memory can faithfully proclaim the mysteries of God as no longer being bound by the works of the devil. From these works may we all sometime also be delivered and receive the Kingdom of Heaven in Christ Jesus our Lord, to Whom may there be glory forever. Amen.

The Life and Ascetic Labors of Our Father, Elder Paisius, Archimandrite of the Holy Moldavian Monasteries of Niamets and Sekoul. Part Twenty.

84. THE VISION OF ELDER SOPHRONIUS*

The following awesome vision clearly reveals the great benefit and salvation which comes from the study of edifying books, and hence the enmity which the demons have towards them, in that these books destroy their snares and devices. The vision was revealed some hundred years ago to a pious abbot of the Monastery of Niamets, which had been founded by the saintly Paisius Velichkovsky.

Some years after the repose of the righteous Paisius, the austerity of the monastery's life began to grow lax, on one hand because of the great wealth it had acquired, and on the other because of the great freedom that was allowed to people of the world who came to visit the monastery. Some came with their whole families to stay in the monastery for two or three months during the summer, spending their time in various worldly entertainments. The monks became negligent in their rule and began rather to care for their vineyards and gardens in the monastery's holdings.

One of the disciples of the saintly Paisius, Sophronius by name, being the abbot at the time, led an austere and spiritual life. One night, thinking that it had already dawned, Sophronius went out by the monastery's gate and looked towards the outer gate, at the place where the holy spring lies today.

* Translated from the Greek periodical *Hagioreitike Bibliotheke* ("Holy Mountain Library"), Dec., 1962 and Jan., 1963

There he saw a man, black in appearance and fearful in form. He wore the garb of a military officer and cried loudly, as officers do when they are giving commands to their troops. His eyes were blood red and shone like flames of fire. His mouth was like that of an ape and his teeth protruded from his mouth. At his waist he had entwined around him a large serpent, whose head hung down with its tongue hanging out like a sword. On his shoulders there rested "galoons" shaped like the heads of asps and on his head he wore a hat, from which venomous snakes extended their bodies and wrapped themselves like hair around his neck.

When the abbot Sophronius saw this, he became petrified from fear. After a while, he came to himself somewhat and asked the officer of darkness what he sought on the monastery's premises at such an hour.

"Can it be that you do not know that I am the Chief Commander here in your Monastery?" answered the black one.

"We have no army here, and our country is enjoying a period of profound peace," replied the abbot.

"Then be it known to you," asnwered the black one, "that I am sent from the unseen hosts of darkness and we are here to wage war against the monastic order. When you make your promises at your tonsure, you declare an unseen war on us and you inflict many wounds on us with your spiritual weaponry. Many times we retreat in shame, since the flame of your prayers burns us. Now, however, we no longer fear you, especially ever since Paisius, your abbot, died. He terrified us and we sufferd much at his hands. Ever since he came here from the Holy Mountain with sixty other monks, I was sent with sixty thousand of our own troops to stop him. As long as he was in charge, we had no rest. In spite of all the temptations, devices and snares that we tried against him and his monks, we availed nothing. At the same time, the tongue of man cannot tell what terrible afflictions, hardships and trials we suffered during that man's sojourn here. He was an experienced soldier and his strategies always caught us off our guard.

"However, after he died things let up a bit and we were able to remove ten thousand of our troops from this front, and so fifty thousand of us were left. When the monks began becoming negligent in their rule and began having more concern for their fields and houses and vineyards, we relieved another ten thousand of our troops of their duties here and the remaining forty thousand stood by to continue the offense. Then, a few years later, some of the monks

decided to change Paisius' rule, and the monks became divided and some left. In the meantime, laymen were allowed to rent rooms in the monastery, and when they brought their women in also, we had a victory celebration and reduced our troops by another ten thousand. Later, when the schools for young boys were opened, the battle came well nigh to an end, and we were able to reduce our troops by another ten thousand, leaving only twenty thousand of us here to take care of the monks."

When the Abbot Sophronius heard these things, he groaned within himself and asked the black one: "What further need have you to remain in the monastery, seeing how, as you yourself confess, the monks have given up their fight? What further work is there left for you here?"

Then, being constrained by the might of God, the ugly one revealed his secret.

"It is true that there is no longer anyone to fight against us as of old, since your love has grown cold and you have become engrossed with worldly and earthly affairs. But there is still one thing left in this monastery that disturbs us and causes us anxiety. It is those filthy rags, I mean the books — perdition take them! — that you have in your library. We live in fear and trembling lest any of the younger monks ever take them into his hands and begin reading them. Once they begin reading those accursed rags, they learn of your ancient piety and your ancient enmity against us, and the little upstarts begin raging against us. They learn that the Christians of old, both lay and monastic, used to pray unceasingly, fast, examine and confess their thoughts, keep vigil and live as though they were foreigners and strangers in this world. Then, simple-minded as they are, they actually begin putting that foolishness into practice. Furthermore, they even take all of the Scriptures seriously- They rave and rail against us like wild beasts; let me tell you, one of those hot-headed fools is enough to chase us all out of here. They become as unrelenting and uncompromising with us as your executed Leader (the Saviour). We have come to have such peace and concord with you. But those so-called spiritual books of yours are a constant source of enmity and discord. Why can't we have peace? Why don't you read my books? Are they not spiritual also? For I too am a spirit, am I not? And I too inspire men to write books. But all that is needed is for one of those wretched rags which you call parchments to fall into the hands of some simple fool and a whole conflagration begins anew and we are forced to flee and take up arms against you once more."

The poor abbot, unable any longer to keep silence, asked him, "What is your greatest weapon against the monastics in these our times?"

And he answered, "Our whole concern at present is to keep monks and nuns away from spiritual occupations, especially prayer and the reading of those smoky books. Why don't you spend more time taking care of your gardens and vineyards, of your fishing and schools for the young, of your hospitality for all those good people who come here during the summer for the fresh air and pure water? The monastics who busy themselves in such pursuits are caught in our nets like flies in a spider's web. Until all those books have been either destroyed or corroded with time, we will have no peace. They are like darts in our side."

No sooner had he finished these words, than the semantron was struck for the service of Matins. Straightaway, the officer of the demonic hosts vanished like smoke. The abbot arose with great pain of soul because of these revelations and came into the church. When the monks had gathered, he told them with tears everything he had seen and heard during that terrible apparition. Then he commanded that all these things be recorded for the edification of those that would come after.

VITA PATRUM

THE LIFE OF THE FATHERS

By Saint Gregory of Tours

CHAPTER THREE

Saint Abraham the Abbot

HOLY EXILE FROM THE EAST

NO ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN, I think, is ignorant of what God says in the Gospel: *Verily I say unto you, that whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed and be thou cast into the sea, and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith will come to pass, he shall have whatsoever he saith* (Mark 11:23-24). Thus, there is no doubt that saints can obtain from the Lord what they ask, because the faith which is in them is firm, and they are not shaken by the wave of hesitations. And for that faith, not only have they been exiles within their own land, because they desired to arrive at the heavenly life, but they have gone as well into foreign lands across the sea, in order the more to please Him to Whom they have vowed themselves.

Such in our time was the blessed Abraham the Abbot, who, after many temptations of the world, entered the territory of Auvergne. And it is not without reason that he is compared for the greatness of his faith to that ancient Abraham to whom God once said: *Depart from your own land and your kindred and go into the land which I will show thee* (Gen. 12:1). Hence he left not only his own land, but even the life of the old man, and he put on the new man, which was formed according to God in justice, holiness, and truth. That is why, when he was found perfect in God's work, he did not hesitate in his faith to seek what he had confidence to obtain by a holy life; and through him the Maker of heaven, sea, and land vouchsafed to work miracles, few in number, it is true, but worthy of admiration.

1. This Abraham, then, was born near the banks of the Euphrates where, advancing in the work of God, he conceived the desire to betake himself to the solitudes of Egypt to visit the hermits. On the way he was seized by pagans and put in bonds, receiving a great number of blows for the name of Christ. He was in irons for five years with much joy until he was freed by an angel. Also wishing to visit the lands of the West, he came to Clermont and there established a monastery near the basilica of Saint Cyricus. By a wondrous power he cast out demons, gave light to the blind, and was a most powerful healer of other maladies.

Thus, when the feast of the above-mentioned basilica had come, he told the steward to prepare in the courtyard, according to custom, the vessels full of wine for the refreshment of the people who had come to the solemnity. The monk excused himself, saying, "Behold how we have to receive the bishop with the duke and the citizens, and scarcely four amphoras of wine remain to us. How are you going to satisfy them all with so little?" And he answered: "Open the cellar for me."

This done, he went in, and like a new Elias, he raised his hands to heaven in prayer, and with eyes full of tears said: "O Lord, I pray Thee that the wine fail not in this vessel until all be served from it in abundance." And being filled with the Holy Spirit, he said: "Thus saith the Lord: The wine will not fail in the vessel, but it will be given freely to all who ask for it, and there shall remain some."

And according to his word, it was served freely to the whole people, who drank it with joy, and there remained some left over. Since the steward had measured the vessel beforehand, and found that there were but four palms in it, he measured it again the next day, after seeing what had taken place, and found in the vessel as much as there had been the day before.

Thus was made manifest to the people the virtue of the Saint, who at length died, full of days, in that monastery, where he was buried with honor. At that time Saint Sidonius was bishop, and the duke was Victorius, who was ruler over seven cities by leave of the Gothic King Euric.

The blessed Sidonius wrote the epitaph of the Saint, wherein he speaks of some of the things we have just related:

"Abraham, worthy to stand beside the celestial patrons whom I shall not fear to call thy colleagues, since they are gone before on the path which thou shalt follow; a share in the martyrs' glory gives a share in the Kingdom of Heaven. Born by Euphrates, for Christ thou didst endure the prison, chains, and

hunger for five long years. From the cruel king of Susa* thou didst fly, escaping alone to the distant land of the West. Marvels born of his holiness followed the steps of the confessor; thyself a fugitive, thou didst put to flight the spirits of evil. Wherever thy footsteps passed, the throng of Lemures cried surrender; the exile's voice bade the demons go forth into banishment. All sought thee, yet didst thou yield to no vain ambition; the honors acceptable in thy sight were those that brought the heaviest burdens. Thou didst shun the tumult of Rome and of Byzantium, and the walls of the city that warlike Titus breached (Jerusalem). Not Alexandria held thee, not Antioch; thou spurnedst Byrsa (Carthage), the famed home of Dido. Thou didst disdain the populous lands of Ravenna by the marshes, and the city named from the wooly swine (Milan). But this corner of earth was pleasing to thee, this poor retreat, this hut roofed with reeds. Here didst thou rear a sacred house to God, thou whose own frame was already itself His temple. Here ended thy wanderings, here thy life's course; now thy labors are rewarded by a twofold crown. Now dost thou stand in Paradise amid the thousands of the Saints, with Abraham for thy fellow wanderer. Now art thou entered into thine own land, from which Adam fell; now lies thy way clear to the sources of thy native stream."**

Several of those sick of fever have been healed at the tomb of blessed Abraham by the aid of heavenly remedies.

NOTES

St. Abraham died in 477, on June 15, when his memory is kept.

The funeral inscription by St. Sidonius, Bishop of Clermont, as quoted above has been taken from *The Letters of Sidonius,* translated by O. M. Dalton, Oxford, 1915, vol. II, pp. 134-5. This same letter of St. Sidonius contains his instructions to his friend Volusianus (later bishop of Tours) concerning the good order of St. Abraham's monastery after his death:

"With these lines I have paid, as you desired, the last observance due to him who is now laid to rest. But if it is the duty of those who yet live, of brothers, friends and comrades, to obey the commands of brotherly affection, I shall make you a request in my turn: I would beg you to use the principles with which you are so eminently endowed for the consolation of the dead man's fol-

*The Persian Sassanian King Yezdegerd, whose great persecution began in 420 and lasted for thirty years.

**I.e., the river Euphrates, traditionally one of the rivers of Paradise.

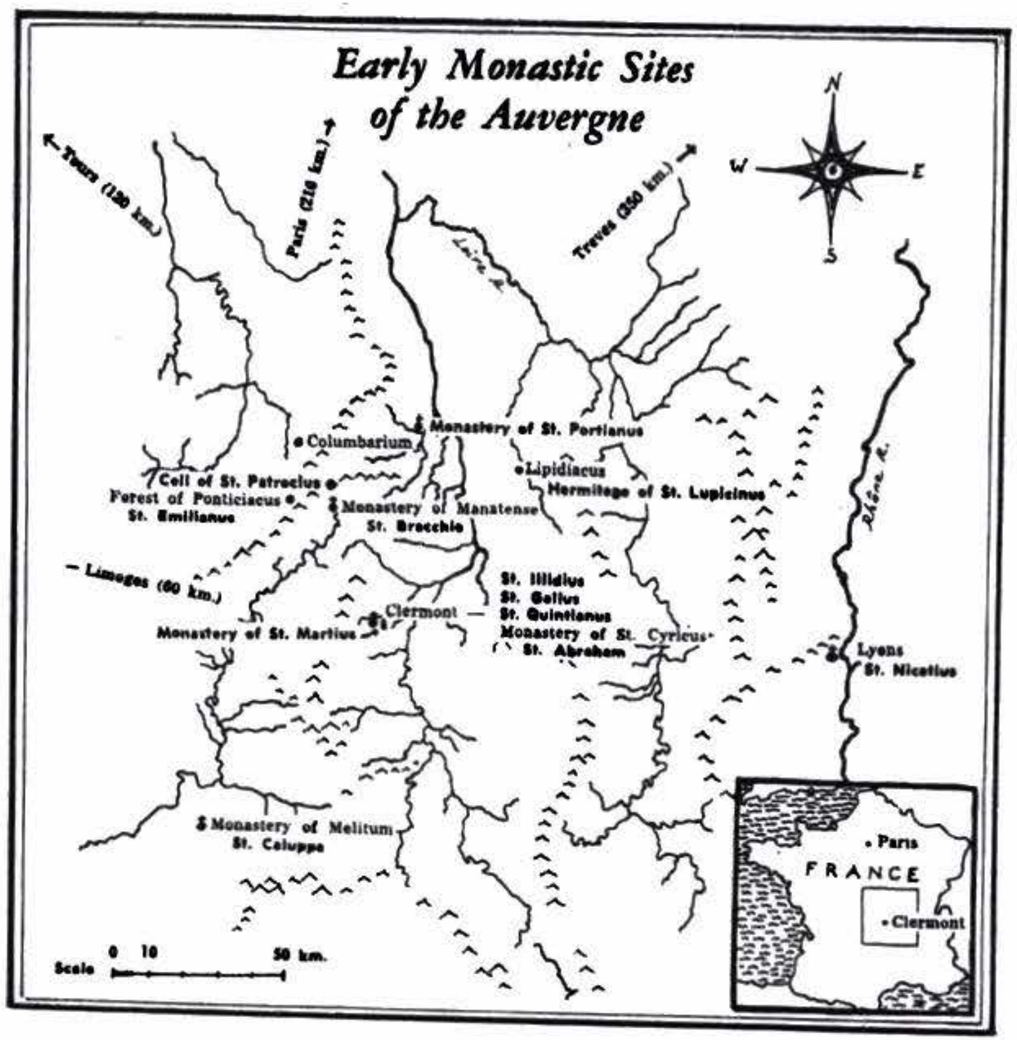
lowers, confirm by the discipline of Lerins or of Grigny* the shaken rule of a brotherhood now cast adrift without a leader. If you find any insubordinate, see to it in person that they are punished; if any obedient, give them praise from your own lips. The holy Auxanius is presumed to be their head; but he, as you well know, is too infirm of body and of too diffident a character, and more fitted to obey than to command. He himself insists that you should be called in, that in succeeding to the headship of the house, he may have the support of your overheadship; for if any of the younger monks should treat him with disrespect, as one lacking alike in courage and experience, thanks to you, a joint rule would not be slighted with impunity. I say no more. If you would have my wishes in a few words, they are these: I desire brother Auxanius to be abbot over the rest, and you yourself to be above the abbot. Farewell." *(The Letters of Sidonius,* p. 136.)

It may well be assumed that St. Abraham's monastery, in view of the "Eastern" orientation of Gallic monasticism in the 5th century, and especially of the Saint's own Eastern origin and travels, was modelled on the eremetic lavras of the East, just as was the monastery of Condadisco founded by St. Abraham's contemporaries, Sts. Romanus and Lupicinus (see chapter one). St. Sidonius' description of the Saint's "poor retreat, this hut roofed with reeds," indicate a monastery of separate huts, like Condadisco or St. Martin's monastery near Tours. The above instructions of St. Sidonius probably represent the beginning of the tendency towards "Western" organization and coenobitism which also transformed Condadisco into a coenobitic monastery early in the 6th century.

The Monastery of Saint Cyricus (named for a martyr of Antioch — *Saint-Cirgues* in French) remained as a priory until 1793, when it was sold as public property by the Revolutionary government.

The tomb of St. Abraham was preserved in the basilica of St. Cyricus until the 10th century, but then was forgotten. Its site was rediscovered in 1684, when miracles again began to flow from prayers to the Saint. In 1761 the stone tomb itself was uncovered, and in 1804 the skeleton of St. Abraham was transferred to the parish church of St. Eutrope. Part of the walls of the ancient basilica still remain as part of the marketplace located between the rues Saint-Cirgues, Fontgieve, and La Place Fayolle, in the city of Clermont-Ferrand, less than half a mile southwest of the site of the basilica of St. Illidius (chapter two).

*The early monastery located at Grigny on the Rhone river near Vienne.



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